

Chapter 1: Phillip

Chapter 1: Phillip begins by offering an intimate glimpse into the life of Phillip Castaneda, a young man navigating homelessness in the backseat of his father's Nissan Sentra in the late summer of 2021. At a time when the world was slowly emerging from the shadows of the coronavirus pandemic, Phillip's daily routine revolved around making the best of his difficult circumstances. Each day began with him dressing in the car and then heading to a nearby Target for bathroom access, marking a stark contrast to the typical morning routines of his peers. The football field visible from his car offered him a glimmer of hope and a symbol of his aspirations. Though small in stature, Phillip was determined to showcase his speed and toughness, and he set his sights on joining the varsity football team, hoping to prove himself on the field despite the odds stacked against him.

Phillip's father, Jude Ward Castaneda, made significant sacrifices to provide his son with a semblance of stability. Parking his car in a lot on Arlington Avenue, surrounded by local businesses like Yum Yum Donuts and a cannabis dispensary, Jude and his son found a quiet spot to sleep at night. They stayed away from other vehicles and used a gym membership for access to showers, a small luxury in the face of their hardship. After the shops closed each night, Jude and his girlfriend would occupy the front seats, leaving Phillip the back for privacy. Jude, once a promising athlete in his youth, now battled the weight of a troubled past filled with addiction and incarceration. Despite his struggles, Jude's determination to give Phillip a better chance in life never wavered. His hope was that Phillip wouldn't fall into the same traps that had ensnared him and instead would find a way to rise above the difficulties they both faced.

Living in California, where nearly a third of the nation's homeless population resides, presented Phillip with unique challenges. His experience of homelessness was further complicated by his turbulent upbringing, including attending six different schools and

facing significant challenges in learning English, which was vastly different from his native American Sign Language (ASL). Born near San Francisco, Phillip grew up in a household where his mother, who was deaf and suffered from rheumatoid arthritis, could not work and relied on disability assistance for their survival. Despite these obstacles, Phillip demonstrated remarkable resilience, adapting to his circumstances while trying to build a better future for himself. The difficulties he faced on a daily basis only seemed to fuel his determination, reinforcing his belief that he could overcome his situation with persistence and hard work.

Phillip's teenage years in Modesto, California, were marked by his involvement in football, where he played alongside hearing peers. During this time, a friend helped him cover the cost of league fees, allowing Phillip to pursue his passion for the sport. While his talent on the field was undeniable, he often found himself struggling with communication barriers that left him isolated from his teammates. At practice, Phillip would position himself at the end of drills, using the time to observe his peers and improve his skills through sheer determination. Football became more than just a game for him; it became a lifeline—a way for him to escape the frustrations of his everyday life. His dreams of one day playing in the National Football League (NFL) were not just lofty ambitions; they became a source of motivation, providing him with hope and direction even during the toughest times.

Phillip's sister, Priscilla Castaneda, often spoke about the joy football brought him, noting that the sport was a constant source of happiness in his life. Despite the many challenges Phillip faced—both in terms of his homelessness and his struggles with communication—football provided him with a sense of purpose and belonging. His commitment to the sport went beyond just playing; it was about finding a way to navigate the complexities of his life and turn his circumstances into an opportunity for success. The drive to succeed in football became a reflection of his broader desire to overcome the hardships he encountered daily. Football, for Phillip, was not just a means of athletic achievement—it was a path to a brighter future, one where his struggles could be outweighed by his triumphs. Through his journey, he demonstrated the power of resilience and the importance of pursuing dreams, no matter how

unattainable they may seem at first.

